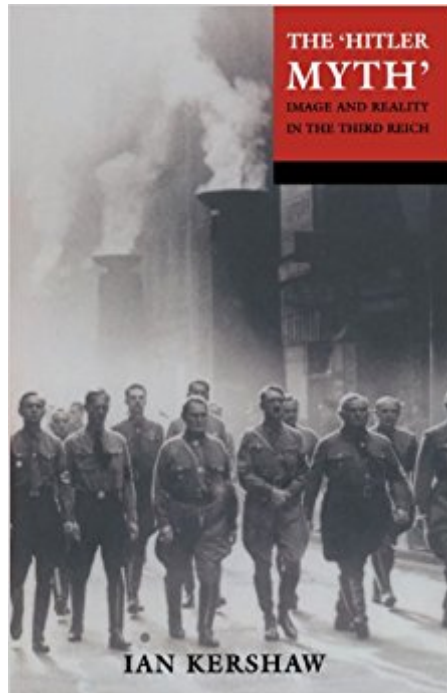




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# The "Hitler Myth": Image And Reality In The Third Reich



## Synopsis

Few, if any, twentieth-century political leaders have enjoyed greater popularity among their own people than Hitler did in the decade or so following his rise to power in 1933. The personality of Hitler himself, however, can scarcely explain this immense popularity or his political effectiveness in the 1930s and '40s. His hold over the German people lay rather in the hopes and perceptions of the millions who adored him. Based largely on the reports of government officials, party agencies, and political opponents, Ian Kershaw's groundbreaking study charts the creation, growth, and decline of the "Hitler myth." He demonstrates how the manufactured "Führer-cult" served as a crucial integrating force within the Third Reich and a vital element in the attainment of Nazi political aims. Masters of the new techniques of propaganda, the Nazis used "image-building" to exploit the beliefs, phobias, and prejudices of the day. Kershaw greatly enhances our understanding of the German people's attitudes and behavior under Nazi rule and the psychology behind their adulation of Hitler.

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## Customer Reviews

Before writing the first volume of his substantial biography of Adolf Hitler, Ian Kershaw focused on the popular appeal of the Nazi dictator in *The "Hitler Myth"*. Arguing that "the sources of Hitler's appeal must be sought ... in those who adored him, rather than in the leader himself," Kershaw shows how Hitler's public image welded together antagonistic forces within the Nazi state, mobilized the nation for war, and contributed to the ethos that animated systematic and genocidal violence. Responding to historians who maintain that Hitler's personality or ideological fixations accounted for

his broad acceptance, Kershaw argues that, in the early 1930s, a sizable plurality of Germans hungered for an omnipotent Führer to stand above the political disharmonies of the Weimar state. Later, foreign policy and military victories attracted many more to the Hitler legend. However, victories were the price for popularity; and Hitler became more and more bloodthirsty as both his image and regime foundered under the blows of the Allied powers. The Hitler myth, then--a cultural phenomenon the Reich Minister Joseph Goebbels claimed as his greatest propaganda triumph--became a fundamental cause for the collapse of the Nazi State. Kershaw's authoritative history of political culture in Hitler's Germany forcefully demonstrates that the Führer's popularity rested less on "bizarre and arcane precepts of Nazi ideology than on social and political values ... recognizable in many societies other than the Third Reich." In our present political environment, which repeatedly features outcries for "leadership" from pundits and public servants alike, the disturbing lessons of The "Hitler Myth" are an urgent warning. --James Highfill --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"The strength of Kershaw's study is that he moves beyond a description of the construction of the 'Hitler myth' to analyze its strength and resiliency."--The Richmond Times-Dispatch

An excellent read in this time of so called "fake news" and the media and journalists being called "the enemies of the state". Here is a quote from this book that somewhat speaks to today: "The price for abdicating democratic responsibilities and placing uncritical trust in the 'firm leadership' of seemingly well-intentioned political authority was paid dearly by Germans between 1933 and 1945. Even if a collapse into new forms of fascism is inherently unlikely in any western democracy, the massive extension of the power of the modern State over its citizens is in itself more than sufficient cause to develop the highest level possible of educated cynicism and critical awareness as the only protection against the marked images of present-day and future claimants to political 'leadership'." pp. 268 - 269. After reading Ian Kershaw's "The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich" you will see that journalists and historians provide "the only protection against the marked images of present-day and future claimants to political 'leadership'." Of course, critical citizens too.

Kershaw is an important writer on the man Adolph Hitler, and world war two from the mind of the man who was bent on restoring Germany to what he felt was its rightful place: dominate on the European continent

Initially, the first pages, appear to be historical fiction; however, as the book proceeds so called fiction become basic fact. This book exposes many facets of the Nazi regiment previously somewhat misunderstood. I do admit that it is difficult reading but once the prose is understood, very informative.

I'm not certain just how many books have been written on the Nazi Regime and on its proponents, but I suspect close to the number that has been devoted to writings on Lincoln, or maybe even, Jesus. Kershaw is more than a scholar on Hitler, he is an icon in the field of research on the regime, and its movers and shakers. I have several of Kershaw's books on my shelf, but the first to catch my attention was, 'The Hitler Myth'. This book explains the dynamics of the Hitler cult and its maniacal following. On each and every page of this book are examples from various sources revealing just how pervasive the cultural frame of mind suited the Third Reich. It's not a secret that German children, raised in an atmosphere of obedience to authority, looked for a strong authority figure, such as Hitler represented. As Kershaw shows us, Hitler, in reality was master of the art of the theatrical though profiled as a man 'whom it was impossible to imagine posing'. A tone of command dominated which was little related to being close to the people. Within the context of a culture whose ideal was power over and not of power shared, the rise of a fanatic such as Hitler, was predictable. I have seen Rorschach test protocols from the Nuremberg archives which reveal the narcissistic character structure and the striving for power that was the hallmark of the regime. What we learn here is the simplicity of the German attitude toward problem solving in a time of crisis. With rationality thrown out the window, deep despair set the stage for a 'heroic father figure' to pick up the pieces of a fallen nation and set it's hopes toward the infinite. Both spiritually and economically depressed, propaganda was easily swallowed as a cure for the pain of insecurity. We all believe what we want to believe but in a democracy we don't have to all agree. In a dictatorship extremes are easily digested as it is not acceptable to question authority. As Alice Miller has shown us, "For Your Own Good", children raised in a cold and unloving atmosphere have little or no sense of moral clarity. This was the fate of the German people, that is, to surrender critical thinking which was prohibited from being developed at home. The specifics are here on the pages of "The Hitler Myth". Anywhere there is prejudice there is susceptibility to extremism. In the age of Hitler, extremism was very attractive. Thinking takes thought and when you are tired, hungry, insecure, and lonely, you don't have the energy or ambition to think for yourself. And, the German people did not think for themselves. They inadvertently colluded in their own destruction.

"The Hitler Myth" is essentially a charting of the effectiveness of--though not an in-depth investigation of--the propaganda machine relative specifically to how the German populace viewed Adolf Hitler from the late 1920's through the duration of the war. Kershaw measures the propaganda machine's effectiveness through 1) opinion poll results, 2) voting figures, and 3) anecdotal documentation, especially reports from Nazi Party functionaries regarding what might today be called "the word on the street." What ends up being Kershaw's most strongly stressed observation in the text is the persistence in Nazi Germany of public "excusability" of Hitler (my clumsy term, not Kershaw's) or a sort of "blame transfer" (again, my inadequate term) that existed relative to any negative news or regime mistakes. In other words, when things went wrong, the public--in a seemingly maniacal way--held onto a "BUT IT'S NOT THE FURHER'S FAULT" mentality. Concomitant to this reality is the extent to which the Nazi Party was actually actively disliked by huge swaths of the population of Germany from quite early on (pre-war), and even more so by the beginning of hostilities with the Allies. Nonetheless, none of that displeasure seemed to get applied to Hitler himself until much, much later. Kershaw's fairly convincing stream of written evidence shows that the public persistently disassociated Hitler from the over-zealous policies, corruption, or flat-out bad ideas and brutish stupidity of the Nazi regime by assuming that Hitler was being misinformed by sycophants, or was being foiled by the pernicious British, or was simply too absorbed with genius foreign policy and thus distracted from domestic concerns, etc. In fact, the evidence suggests that during many points of the Third Reich's embarrassing reign, at least up until the defeat at Stalingrad, when the popularity of the Nazi Party worsened, Hitler's personal popularity actually increased. The "why" behind all this is tricky, and Kershaw is honest enough to say so, admitting that he doesn't have a complete answer. But, his exhaustive research over the years has helped. Clearly, he thinks that the Nazi propaganda machine and its persistent application is the principle reason for the amazing success of the "Hitler myth." Or, to put it in modern pundit parlance: "It's the media, stupid." Control of communications by savvy, Machiavellian manipulators like Joseph Gobbles allowed for Hitler to always be positioned (literally, too!) in the best possible light, no matter what the national or international circumstances. A secondary but important factor in the vitality of the Hitler myth was simply a desperate German thirst for leadership (decisive leadership or at least decisive-sounding) in the wake of 20 years of highly dysfunctional adolescent democracy burdened by rank corruption and destabilized by what was at the time the compelling Communist alternative, Communism having not then been discredited anywhere in the world nearly to the extent it has been now. While Kershaw does not apply the lessons of the Hitler myth directly to any aspect of today's political environment, some parallels are there, and he discretely suggests as much in a

few places in the text. Kershaw wisely leaves it up to you, the reader, to plumb them. I suspect that Kershaw, being a British citizen and longtime observer of the media of the past, cannot help but find some slight comparisons--arguably worrying--between the inability of the German media to respond critically to Hitler and the inability of the modern media to do the same relative to national leaders or powerful and essentially conservative or nationalistic movements, particularly in the United States and in those large regions of the Middle East served by Al-Jazeera's news service. Of course media observers, including some of Kershaw's professional colleagues, outside of the U.S. and some within (where it is considered fairly "politically incorrect") have drawn parallels to the staging of Hitler-focused Nazi propaganda events and rallies and those staged by the current American presidential administration. Parallels have also been drawn--much more often in Kershaw's native Britain than in the U.S.--between the Third Reich's control of the media the corporate control of the media today. (Incidentally, Kershaw does somewhat discuss public partisan events, especially Nazi rallies in small communities and parades in Berlin and elsewhere, and it is interesting to read the obsessively detailed accounts of official Nazi reports citing how many people were in the crowds during parades, what percentage of them seemed to be executing the Nazi salute, and so forth.) Granted, the media's inability to serve genuine public discourse today and be properly critical (I use "critical" in the same sense of the word as it is used in the term "critical thinking;" that is, "critical" meaning the qualities of being careful, objective, and intellectually rigorous, not necessarily "negative") is less severe today than in Germany in the 1930's and 1940's. But, that begs the question: just how un-critical is uncritical \*enough\* to cause great harm to a society, nation, or culture, particularly a Western one? If there is a glaring omission in Kershaw's book, it is that of technological and sociological context relative to media. His entire text is about propaganda, media, and public perception, and yet there is no examination of just how many of the German people read newspaper, how many newspapers there were, how many of the people listened to radio, how many hours, and what radio shows existed, and what the options were. In fact, at times it seems Kershaw was too close to his own material, and failed to realize that the basics of the media landscape of Germany from the 1920's through the 1940's isn't something even erudite readers are likely to understand today. Granted, he touched on points of this landscape: there are brief mentions of posters and their use, or the number of Hitler's speeches and their frequency; there are citations throughout from specific newspapers, including underground anti-Nazi publications (some of which, in retrospect, seem to have been stirring prescient and clear-sighted, so much so as to make me shake my head at times while reading their predictions and worries about what Hitler would bring to the German people and Europe). But, it was not nearly a coherent enough picture. Even just one or

two pages of text giving an overarching view of the German media landscape during the 1920's and 1930's would have been extremely helpful.

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